

# T H E B A R G A I N



S T E V E N G E H R K E

Together, they were the good pig,  
always checking locks, vats of water  
boiling in their fireplace, and still  
he came, pale and thinly bearded, drawn  
to the taste of moon inside their daughter's  
room, her colic evicting them from sleep,  
the two rising to find their bricked-  
together shelter turned a lighthouse  
to an aimless ship, that nameless, likely  
homeless, man pounding at their door  
past two most nights, her quickly on  
the phone to the police, him trying to dis-  
lodge the man, hoping a tide of passing cars  
would lift him from their fast-eroding  
shore. The cops, when they arrived,  
suggested they might pay him off, tape a few  
dollars to their door, but they were too zombie,  
too fretful and sleep-deprived, too far  
from empathy, to see anything but a stray  
who, once fed, would add their house  
to the clots of blood on the map inside  
of his head. When he wasn't there,  
they'd hear that knocking in the bathroom  
window's broken latch, sense him  
wandering but closing in, like an electric  
pulse mazing through the grid. In bed,  
they'd lay awake waiting for the first  
knock to fall like a rubber hammer to the knee,  
wondering what secret *open sesame* this

stranger might possess, thinking he might unscrew their hinges with a fingernail, lift a key from underneath his tongue, their anxiety reshaping him until they almost believed he was their own private Rumpelstiltskin, there to remind them that gold can always be restrawed, that their daughter could be recalled, perhaps not just by chance or their incompetence, but by that subtle bargain they had struck, the promise that, to keep her safe, they would love each other just a sliver less. Which might be why, once, when their nightly dose of trespass was delivered, the husband started dumbly knocking back, not out of anger or any simple wanting-out, but as if to say that they didn't need this easy prophecy, didn't need a scruffy Hermes in disguise, as if to say, *this door can knock itself*, because our house was already ringing on its own – wasn't it? – the ladder swiped from beneath the belfry we had climbed, the two of us waiting for the echo of *who-we'd-been* to finally refund, but hearing only *are* and *soon enough become*.